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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV IT ITALY NATIONAL ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: PRODI LAUNCHES UNOFFICIAL CANDIDACY FOR ITALIAN PM
WITH DOMESTIC BROADSIDE

REF: ROME 5665

11. (U) ROMANO PRODI IN A JANUARY 2 INTERVIEW WITH THE CENTER-LEFT DAILY LA REPUBBLICA LAMBASTED THE BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT FOR ITS HANDLING OF ITALY'S EU PRESIDENCY SEMESTER. TAKING OFF THE KID GLOVES HE HAD KEPT LOOSELY TIED SINCE LAST JULY, PRODI BLAMED THE CENTER-RIGHT COALITION FOR CONTRIBUTING TO DIVISIONS OVER IRAQ, THE CRISIS OF THE EMU STABILITY PACT, AND THE FAILURE TO REACH CLOSURE ON A NEW EU CONSTITUTION. HE FURTHER CHASTISED THE GOVERNMENT FOR ITS HANDLING OF THE CHANGEOVER TO THE EURO, ARGUING THAT, "THE MOST ELEMENTARY CHECKS ON PRICE TRENDS HAVE BEEN LACKING IN ITALY."

12. (U) USING THE SAME LA REPUBBLICA FORMAT, FM FRATTINI RESPONDED IN KIND TO PRODI ON JANUARY 3. HE DEFENDED THE GOVERNMENT BY CLAIMING THAT IT REFUSED TO COUNTENANCE A BAD CONSTITUTIONAL TEXT, WAS ABLE TO UNITE THE EU AROUND A COMMON APPROACH TO ITS SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH NATO ACCEPTABLE TO THE U.S., AND MOVED THE EU TO AGREE ON A NEW INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT PLAN. FRATTINI ADDED THAT IF PRODI WANTS TO PURSUE DOMESTIC POLITICKING HE SHOULD STEP DOWN FROM HIS EC PERCH. FINANCE MINISTER TREMONTI ALSO WEIGHED IN AND ARGUED THAT THE CENTER-RIGHT GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO CONTROL PRICE GOUGING ARE A CONTINUATION OF POLICIES FIRST IMPLEMENTED DURING PRODI'S TERM AS ITALIAN PRIME MINISTER (1996-1998).

13. (SBU) COMMENT: BY TAKING SUCH A DIRECT AND AGGRESSIVE STAB AT THE GOVERNMENT, PRODI APPEARS TO BE SIGNALING HIS CLEAR INTENT TO LEAD THE CENTER-LEFT IN THE NEXT ROUND OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS, WHICH WILL BE HELD NO LATER THAN MID-2006. HE STILL REFUSES TO DECLARE WHETHER HE WILL HEAD AN EVENTUAL UNITED CENTER-LEFT TICKET FOR THE JUNE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS, HOWEVER. PRODI CAN TAKE HEART IN THAT A POLL MEASURING VOTER INTENTIONS CONDUCTED ON DECEMBER 19-20 SHOWED HIM OUTPACING BERLUSCONI BY FIFTEEN PERCENTAGE POINTS, ALTHOUGH THE TWO COMPETING CENTER-RIGHT/CENTER-LEFT COALITIONS ARE RUNNING NECK-AND-NECK.

14. (SBU) COMMENT CONT. WE EXPECT THAT PRODI WILL TRY TO BREAK THE GOVERNMENT OVER THE BACK OF EUROPE BY CLAIMING TO BE THE ONLY POLITICAL LEADER ABLE TO REPRESENT AND DEFEND ITALY'S HISTORICAL PRO-EU VOCATION. HOWEVER, WITH A THIRD OF THE ITALIAN PUBLIC AGREEING THAT THE BERLUSCONI GOVERNMENT HANDLED THE EU PRESIDENCY POSITIVELY AND A THIRD DISAGREEING IN A DECEMBER 21 POLL (ONE THIRD DIDN'T HAVE AN OPINION), PRODI DOES NOT BEGIN THE LONG CAMPAIGN SEASON WITH ANY UNIQUE THEMATIC ADVANTAGE. END COMMENT.

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